

Forgive the Pain of the Past

Julie, a forty-three-year-old financial planner, came to our session angry, upset, and fed up with feeling so much negativity in her life. She was unable to get out of the funk she had been feeling for years. She had tried positive thinking, self-help books, and spiritual strategies—she even got a new boyfriend in the hopes that he would make her feel better—but nothing was working.

As I listened to her talk, I noticed a pattern: Julie spent most of her time blaming everyone in her life for how she was feeling and what was happening. I knew forgiveness was what Julie needed to rise beyond the negativity she was feeling.

The moment I said the word “forgiveness,” Julie resisted the thought of forgiving the people in her life she was still upset with. She just couldn’t see how she could forgive her parents and ex-husband. She didn’t feel they deserved it.

This is a huge misconception about forgiveness. Before you skip this and move on to the next chapter, not wanting to even think about completing this step, let me share an important truth with you: Forgiveness doesn’t absolve the other person for what they may have done to you.

This is so important that I will say it again. *Forgiveness doesn’t absolve the other person for what they may have done to you.*

It does, however, allow you to release the connection of resentment or judgment towards this person and, most importantly, frees you from that negative energy. Forgiveness doesn’t nullify what

happened to you but it says you don't want to hold onto that negative energy in your body, mind, or heart anymore.

While forgiveness to some people is "The F Word," and is something to be avoided at all costs, it is essential for us to forgive in order to truly let go of the past and create what we want both in the present and the future.

Remember that large, extremely worn, and outdated sack from the coffee shop story in Step 2? If you are still carrying that around, forgiveness is the key to letting go of the rest of that baggage. Even if we aren't acknowledging the resentments or pain of the past, we are still carrying the huge weight and burden of them with us day after day and year after year.

So how do you finally drop that bag and allow the memories, pain, fears, and limitations to be released? You learn how to truly forgive. Forgiveness is not a thought accepted by your mind but a release you feel in your heart. And in this step, you will learn how to give yourself this gift and finally let go of whatever from the past you are either consciously or unconsciously holding onto.

Holding Onto Anger and Resentment

I wasn't surprised that Julie was resistant to the concept of forgiveness. But I knew once she faced her unresolved emotions surrounding both her parents and her ex, forgiveness would begin to feel like a possibility. We can't even *imagine* forgiveness if we haven't first processed and *released* the emotion associated with it. Because Julie hadn't yet worked through her anger and resentment towards these important people in her life, she couldn't see how forgiveness was possible.

We started with her childhood. As she opened up about her past, Julie explained how her entire life she felt a lot of resentment towards her parents for not being there for her. She felt like they focused more on their lives, their new marriages, and what they needed. Regardless

of whether she was at her mom or dad's house, she was often left home with the nanny while her parents and their new spouses were out enjoying boating trips, movies, or dinners. She was an only child and the bottom line was that Julie felt abandoned by them as a child. She also shared the anger she felt towards her ex-husband for his infidelity and his continual need while they were getting divorced to be almost boastful about his current relationship and how excited he was about this new woman in his life. He would tell Julie how happy he was and, further, that she should take his advice and find a new man that would make her happy, as happy as his new girlfriend made him feel.

Both of these situations held a lot of pain for Julie. Feeling left behind by her parents created deep hurt in her heart, hurt she had carried for more than thirty years. And when her husband moved on while he was still in his marriage with Julie, it was the ultimate betrayal. But regardless of how painful her experiences had been, the grudges she was holding onto were definitely holding her back, dragging her down, and keeping her stuck in negativity and misery. These relationships, both past and present, were bringing up her wounds and causing her to re-experience the trauma and unresolved emotions.

Instead of taking a hard look at how those experiences could teach her something about herself, she remained focused on what the other people did or didn't do and how damaged she had become as a result. She literally got stuck in the energy of blaming them for who they were and what they did to her.

When we are in the energy of blaming other people, we aren't able to see the lesson of that experience or how that experience might have been a blessing in some way. Once we can see what the experience was here to teach us and accept that lesson, we can move to the place where forgiveness is possible.

As I guided Julie to connect with her anger, she began to see it as a familiar feeling. She noticed how powerful her anger had been

throughout her life and how it had always guided her to strive for more, not accept less, and never quit. In fact, one of the things she loved about herself was that she was relentless. She began to revere her anger for how beneficial of an emotion it had been and realized she was deeply in touch with her anger because of how she felt about the injustices in her life and her childhood. As Julie began to be more at peace with being angry, see the benefit of her anger, and allow it the space it needed to be processed, she became less defensive and less in attack mode. From this place, the process of forgiveness was now possible.

By embracing how much these experiences had taught her about herself, Julie was now able to let go of carrying around these resentments. From this space, she was able to do the forgiveness process, which you will have the opportunity to complete at the end of this step. Through this forgiveness process, she released these negative emotions and experiences from her psyche. Instead of focusing so much energy on blaming her parents and ex-husband, she could now use that energy to create the life she truly wanted.

Months later after releasing this inner baggage, Julie began to think about dating again. She had been interested in this really nice man she saw daily at the coffee shop they had both frequented and he often went out of his way to talk to her. Julie made a promise to herself to act more engaged with him the next time he struck up a conversation.

A few days later, they were in the coffee shop in a full blown conversation and out of the blue, he asked her to go out sometime. Julie couldn't believe she actually had a date with a man that she was genuinely interested in. Regardless of how this potential romance would end up, all she knew was that it felt so much better than holding onto the past and living in anger and resentment. Julie went shopping the next day to pick out a new outfit to wear on her date the following weekend. She was beyond excited. A year later, Julie called

me and shared that they were still dating and thoroughly enjoying each other's company.

Visualizing Our Resentments

So how destructive are these tiny little grudges and resentments to our relationship? Here is a visual that will help you see this more clearly. Think about someone you are having a hard time forgiving, and as you close your eyes, imagine standing in front of them. You are close to each other with just a small space separating you. Now, imagine taking a piece of chalk and drawing a small circle on the ground between the two of you. Imagine that every time you have a negative judgment about this person, every time you hold onto a resentment about this person, every time you say something negative or judgmental about them or directly to them, every time you choose to not forgive them for what they did or said, negative energy enters the circle of space and the space becomes wider and deeper.

This small circle eventually grows bigger and bigger and creates a larger separation between the two of you, pushing you farther apart. And the farther apart you become, the more disconnected you feel. This is exactly what happens, for example, in relationships or marriages after years and years of anger, resentment, and judgments that haven't been resolved. There is an ocean of negative space in between both people in the relationship. Often, because the space is so massive and contains so many unresolved hurts from the past, the couple can't find their way back to each other. One moment and one event at a time, the continual string of resentments and negative energy breaks the bond they once had.

Forgiveness is an essential part of every relationship. It is important to not allow the anger or resentments we feel to become an ocean in which we can't navigate our way back to each other. Forgiveness is a powerful practice that we can utilize in our lives to continually let go of the past and live authentically from the inside out.

A New Definition of Forgiveness

For some of us, forgiveness may feel extremely difficult to attain; however, it is simply a choice to let go and no longer hold onto something that caused us pain or upset. Forgiveness can simply be viewed as “the choice to let go of past hurts.” It may be hard for us to let go of those hurts and forgive someone when we feel he or she has wronged us in some way. However, we must remind ourselves that forgiveness is not the act of condoning someone’s behavior or letting that person off the hook; it is a choice to not carry that pain around any longer.

Thich Nhat Hanh has often been quoted as saying, “When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help.” One of the most powerful tools for getting to a place where forgiveness is possible is by choosing to look through the eyes of compassion. Forgiveness becomes easier when we can find compassion for why that person treated us the way they did. By understanding that this person is suffering from something painful that has happened in their life and that this very pain is the source from which they have mistreated you, it will help you to more easily embrace the possibility of forgiveness. By opening up to this possibility and having compassion for their suffering, you make a choice to free yourself from being connected to them and can let go of carrying the resentment around with you.

Remember, the only reason that someone is hurting you is because he or she was hurt. Someone who truly loves himself or herself and feels good about who they are, does not have the need to intentionally hurt you. And it is important to remember that when *we* hurt someone, it is always coming from *our* wounded self. By holding onto the resentment and grudge, we allow someone else’s wounds to determine our destiny and we don’t allow ourselves to move beyond the hurt and heal. And worse, we choose to remain attached to the painful experience as well as attached to the very person who caused us this pain.

Let's flip our conversation on forgiveness over on its side for a moment and view it through your life and your perspective. Think back to a time in your life when you did something wrong and felt bad about it. Or maybe you remember a time when you wronged someone else in some way. Maybe you did it intentionally because you were hurting and wanted to retaliate, or maybe you found out later that you hurt someone's feelings even though you had no intention of doing so.

Imagine how it would feel if that person held onto a resentment towards you and chose not to forgive you. Imagine if that person, still to this day, when they saw you, thought back to that moment and held a grudge against you, talked negatively about you, or cast negative energy your way. We have all hurt someone at some point in our life. Whether it is intentional or not, we as human beings hurt people just as they hurt us. It is a part of our journey of growth and learning. And the only way to move through these growing pains is through forgiveness. When we give another the grace of forgiveness, we are affirming our desire to feel peace in our life instead of carrying around bitterness or disdain.

When we choose to forgive others or ask for forgiveness for ourselves, we are a part of the healing instead of the hatred. Neither side of this equation is more important than the other. They are both equally essential. When we can let go of holding onto the upsets of the past or holding onto the feelings of being angry or resentful towards someone else, we can experience freedom in our mind, body, and in our heart. We forgive others to let go of re-creating the past. Continuing on with the feelings of hatred or blame keeps us separate and continues the experience of war-like behavior in our relationship with another person. If you truly don't want to stay connected to this person in any way, forgive them and let go of the connection between the two of you. It is the most peaceful way to release your attachment to this negative energy in your life.

CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

Debra—Dependent On Approval

Debra, the owner of a floral shop, was in her fifties and at the end of her rope. She was in a marriage that was verbally and emotionally abusive and was just feeling broken. She repeatedly expressed how unbearable it was and that she “didn’t know how this could have happened.” She had always been a strong, independent woman in her twenties and thirties and yet, all these years later, she found herself feeling dependent on her husband for approval and love. However, love and approval was far from what she was receiving from him these days. He was often short, dismissive, and condescending and rarely considered her needs in any decision. He treated her more like his servant, than his wife. Sitting in his chair on a Saturday morning, he would yell for coffee and demand that she always cater to his needs. He felt it was her responsibility to take care of him, regardless of the way he treated her. Although he was secretly having a relationship with a younger woman, she just couldn’t seem to let him go. She was angrier with herself than she was with him.

I knew that it was time for her to embrace forgiveness, because she was stuck in blaming him for everything he did and, even worse, blaming herself for allowing it. She couldn’t seem to “call it quits,” as she put it and forsake the thirty years they had spent together.

The most important person for Debra to forgive was herself. Once she could stop beating herself up for “staying too long,” she would have more access and connection to her courage and strength and would be able to do the right thing to take care of herself.

Debra shared that she had no idea how she could truly forgive herself for wasting all this precious time with a man who treated her this way and was having an affair with a longtime neighbor friend of theirs. But forgiveness was truly her only ticket to freedom. It was the only way she could release her attachment to what he did or didn’t do and start focusing on what she needed to do to heal.

We began the process of forgiveness with an exercise in clarity. I asked Debra to spend the week writing down all the things she was angry at herself for doing, all those things she was still beating herself up for. And next to each one, I asked her to identify the “moment” she remembered feeling that it wasn’t okay that she was allowing this or was doing this to herself.

Here is the first item she wrote on her list: “I knew he was having an affair two years ago and I still went to Bermuda with him and acted like everything was okay. I spent a few nights in the bathroom crying into a towel so he wouldn’t hear me, and although I felt humiliated, I continued to put on a smile when we were together because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing him and the life that we had built together.”

I asked Debra to read that out loud. As she started to read, she got choked up and began to cry. Debra was feeling the truth of who she was and what she was reading.

She said, “I know why I’ve stayed all these years. I just wanted to believe that we could make it through anything and that our love was real. It hurts so bad to know that he’s given up and I’m just not there yet; I don’t want to give up.”

As she began to see the real reason she had stayed, and that it came from a place of love for herself and all she had invested in their life together, she put down the bat and stopped swinging. She began to admire herself for her strength and resilience and for believing that “love conquers all” instead of feeling stupid and calling herself a fool. By doing this exercise and having this realization, she began to have more compassion for herself than hatred. And, most importantly, she began to open up to forgiving herself.

Insight About Debra

As Debra embraced the love she had for herself and worked through the process of forgiveness, she began to feel more able to take action and make the choices in her life she needed to make. She finally

accepted that her husband had moved on and was in love with someone else. And she was now able to let him go.

Six months later when I checked in with Debra, she was excited about the possibilities for herself and her new life. For the first time, in longer than she could remember, she was considering herself and her needs first and was feeling exhilarated by her new home, her new freedom and the joy she felt just being her. She loved her morning ritual of getting a cup of coffee for herself and doing a little gardening with music in the background. She was becoming really good at loving herself and tending to her own needs, which was the exact self care she needed.

Checking In

Let's take a moment and step back. You may still be having a really hard time with this. Maybe you were deeply hurt and wounded and your life was forever changed by the violations of someone else. Maybe you're feeling like you can't get to a place where you can connect with the reason that this happened in your life or you can't feel compassion for this person's pain. Every experience of our lives holds the seed of potential for growth. When we are having trouble forgiving someone, we must turn our attention back towards ourselves and connect with what is keeping us from letting go of our connection to that experience, that relationship, and the past. We may find out that there is more wisdom for us to learn as a result of that experience and relationship.

For example, Debra learned so much about herself from her exploration. She learned how resilient she was and how much she believed in love. Until she did this deep exploration, she wasn't able to forgive either her husband or herself. Maybe you are getting to the place where you feel like you are ready to let go, but you simply don't know how to release the hurt you still feel or the anger that still exists.

Most often people have a hard time forgiving someone because they are still holding onto and intently focusing on how much they were hurt or wronged by that person's actions. As true as that may

be for you, holding onto your hurts doesn't hurt the other person, it hurts you. Not forgiving them also doesn't hurt the other person, it hurts you.

Emmet Fox states "Resentment, condemnation, anger, and the desire to see someone punished are things that rot your soul, no matter how cleverly you may be disguising them."⁵

Forgiveness doesn't mean someone didn't mistreat you, upset you, or violate you. Forgiveness says you don't want to hold onto that negative energy in your body, mind, or heart anymore. Forgiving others is an act of grace and all it takes to begin is an act of willingness. You may not know how exactly to forgive this person, but just being willing to begin the process of forgiveness is an amazing first step.

Forgiveness Creates a Clear Path to the Future

Let's see what forgiveness looks like in action by using the visual of the open road we explored in Step 6. In a moment, we are going to look at this expansive and open road to the future through the perspective of having forgiven others and ourselves. But first, let's explore what the road looks like when we are holding onto resentments from the past.

Not forgiving ourselves and others creates obstacles on the path ahead. Along the way, these obstacles may show up as rocks, boulders, stoplights, or construction zones. As we have explored, some of these boulders may be from past beliefs that are holding us back or other events that are being transferred from the past. And some of them will be places where we have not forgiven ourselves or others. The inability to forgive or the choice to not forgive places barriers on the road to our future.

So let's say, for example, you have an experience with a co-worker that is not resolved within you, and you are not at peace with this relationship or this person. Let's assume it is someone you see every day. Imagine beginning on your road in the morning with

excitement, inspiration, and passion to create something new. As you get to work you see her and feel a twinge of annoyance in your stomach. For some reason, today you keep running into her and thinking about the things you don't like about her and what she said to you. You have lunch with another co-worker and you spend time talking about her and how much you dislike her. With every bit of energy, you focus on the dislike of your co-worker. By doing this, you begin to litter your clear open pathway with pebbles and rocks. The excitement, inspiration, and passion you had at the beginning of the day is now diminishing and turning into frustration and anger. As this dissension with your co-worker increases, the pebbles quickly turn into boulders, creating an obstacle between you and the clear path to your future.

Whether it's in your thoughts or whether it's something that happens to you physically when you see her, you are allowing these obstacles to continue to pop up within you. Sometimes this obstacle will be a negative emotion you feel, or it may be the negativity within you that causes you to not feel good about yourself. Regardless of the form it takes, it will stop you from being in the flow of focusing on what you want to create. It will prevent you from giving all your attention and energy to the project that you are involved in.

If we are unwilling or unable to forgive, we create these pebbles, rocks, boulders, stop signs, or stoplights to stumble over and deal with every step of the way. Take a moment to imagine how quickly this could slow you down on the path to creating what you desire. Think about how quickly it will slow down the momentum you may be creating in your business or the progress you've been making on a project you're working on.

Let's now look at how forgiveness can help you to clear this cluttered road that is filled with anger and resentment toward your co-worker. If you are willing to forgive her and forgive yourself, you will be able to begin to remove those pebbles, rocks, and roadblocks that are on your path. In addition, you won't continue to place new

ones on the road to your future. When you look at forgiveness in this way, you can see how essential it is to forgive yourself and forgive others. Not because what they did or said was okay and you condone that behavior, but because you don't want those blocks in your body or psyche. You don't want these current issues becoming obstacles on the road to your future.

Clearing the Road Ahead

So how do we know when it's time to forgive? Anytime we are stuck pointing our finger towards someone and blaming them for how we feel, what is happening to us, or why we can't move forward, we want to look at how *we* are holding onto our attachment to what they did and open up to the possibility of forgiveness.

It is important to remember that forgiveness is not the end result of allowing someone to be right about something. Forgiveness is simply allowing yourself to release the connection of resentment towards that person and allowing yourself and the other person to have a new relationship. Sometimes that may mean that the relationship gets a second chance. Other times, you may decide not to continue in a relationship with that person. Either way, forgiveness is a natural next step once you have identified and learned the lesson that relationship had in store for you. By learning the lesson that relationship afforded you and forgiving them, you ensure that you won't drag unresolved emotions or experiences from this relationship into the future.

When we hold onto something about someone that we didn't like, or something they did to us, it becomes a part of our future experience with them, until we are willing to forgive and let it go. When we continue to hold onto our resentments, we are guaranteeing that this person will always show up in this way from this point forward. We are guaranteeing that we won't be able to have a different experience in this relationship. In other words, we are choosing to continually repeat the past.

Forgiveness is an essential practice in our daily lives. There will continue to be experiences in our lives where we wanted someone to be or act in a way other than they did. There will be times when we get hurt or take something personally. There will be times when we say or do something that may be hurtful to someone else. Or someone may be offended or have an issue with something we said or did. We are always in relationship with people, are fallible, and can't please everyone. Forgiveness is, therefore, crucial for us to learn and practice often.

When we say we're sorry or accept someone else's apology, we are releasing each other from repeating the past. Letting go of the past and creating an open road to our future is the gift forgiveness gives back to us. And what a beautiful gift it is.

Use the Bite-Size exercise and the Forgiveness Process in this step to create freedom in your heart, mind, and body by letting go of whatever experience you may be holding onto.

A Bite-Size Exercise



Write down one person you are ready to forgive. Journal for five minutes about all the benefits of letting go of the resentment you have been holding onto. What will you be able to create in your life by accessing the energy that has been tied up with this resentment?

Want More? Download The Forgiveness Process and use it to improve every relationship in your life at www.dianealtomare.com/Forgiveness-Process

The Forgiveness Process

Take a few deep breaths, close your eyes, and bring to mind someone you have been blaming or holding a resentment towards. Write down the answers you hear to the following questions:

1. Begin by picturing yourself facing the other person. Imagine you are as close as you want to be to him or her. Take a deep breath and notice the size of the circle between you. Is it the size of a pool or the size of the ocean? What hurts are most present in that circle between the two of you? What are you most upset about?
2. Is forgiveness an option in this relationship right now or do you still have things to work through before you are ready to forgive this person or ask for forgiveness? (If forgiveness is not an option yet, honor yourself by going back to the exercise at the end of Step 4 where you will be able to receive more insight about this relationship and experience.)
3. Take a deep breath and allow yourself to see the one thing that you most need to forgive them for.
4. What have you learned about yourself as a result of what happened in this relationship? Can you see how you have grown in any way because of what transpired? Are you stronger, more resilient, or maybe you have more compassion for others?
5. Take a deep breath and acknowledge what you have learned or what you now know as a result of this experience with this person. Maybe you realized you have more strength than you knew you had, maybe you have seen a new part of yourself develop as a result of your relationship, or maybe

you have learned to set boundaries or get clarity about who you want to be in your life.

6. Take another deep breath and allow yourself to see one action you could take this week to make peace with a part of this experience. Maybe it's just something you need to do within yourself to let go of focusing so much energy and attention on this relationship or issue. What's one thing you could do to begin to create more of what you want in your life or in this relationship?
7. On your next breath, notice whatever emotion or emotions are still present within you. Breathe into your heart and see the color of that emotion present in your heart—maybe you see red for anger or blue for sadness or green for embarrassment or shame. Allow yourself to breathe into your heart, and as you open up to release this pain and emotion from your heart, say, *I release you and release our negative connection right now in this moment. And, I am freeing myself from being connected to you in this way. I let go of holding onto this upset any longer.* Allow yourself to see the negative feelings you feel toward this person releasing from your heart and picture the color you associated with your feelings being transformed into a beautiful white light that fills your mind, body, and heart.

Take a deep breath, acknowledge yourself for doing this work, and schedule the action that you received from this process in your calendar.

